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Guest: Court services for kids, interpreters slashed in state budget proposals

The state Senate budget, if passed, would hurt the people who come to court for justice, writes guest columnist Deborah Fleck.

By [Deborah Fleck](#)

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COURTS are about people, not just attorneys or judges. That's why it is so disturbing to know that the state Senate budget, if passed, would hurt the people who come to court for justice.

The Senate budget would result in a loss of \$8 million to trial courts and the agency providing direct services to these courts.

That draconian cut would slash court services and people being hurt, such as children whose parents are accused of abuse or neglect, and those who cannot speak English.

The House budget is far better for the people using our court system, but it still cuts \$12 million from truancy funding. That money is important because keeping kids in school has significant benefits — to them, in getting jobs and staying out of the criminal justice system and, to society, in terms of them becoming taxpaying members.

Washington state is dead last, 50th out of 50 states, in state money spent on trial courts. The budget for the entire judicial branch does not account for even 1 percent of the entire state operating budget.

Beginning in 2005, the Legislature, to its great credit, began moving down the path to contribute its fair share of funding Washington's trial courts. Even in the worst part of our recent Great Recession, the Legislature did not completely decimate its progress in funding trial court costs that are mandated by our state constitution and statutes.

Now, that progress is in jeopardy.

Funding for trial courts is administered by the Administrative Office of the Courts. Almost 65 percent of the office's budget cannot be cut, either because the constitution prohibits it or the Legislature has protected it by a proviso. That means the remainder,

or 35 percent, would bear the burden, resulting in devastating cuts to direct services to the courts or to programs known as pass-throughs.

Pass-through funds pass through to trial courts and the people the courts serve. Some of these are vulnerable children. The courts appoint guardians ad litem, required by state statute, to look after children's best interests in dependency cases when the state alleges they have been abused or neglected.

What will they do if the Legislature does not fund the supervisors for Court Appointed Special Advocates, also known as the CASA program?

These community members volunteer their time and attention to watch over these children and allow the courts to leverage public dollars, saving millions. The advocates' program will be in crisis because counties simply do not have the funds to pay for this responsibility assumed by the state. Cases involving dependent children will likely suffer delays because they cannot proceed without either a guardian ad litem or a more expensive attorney for the child.

What about funding for court interpreters? A growing number of people who use the courts cannot speak English.

Without interpreters, they have little opportunity to speak up for themselves or to even understanding what is happening. This could be an abused spouse desperate for help. Court interpreter funding is on the chopping block.

Some of the pass-through money goes to fund collection of legal financial obligations in criminal and traffic cases. The court clerks have efficiently and successfully collected millions of dollars for the state and the counties. This funding pays for staff doing that work.

The Legislature cannot allow this. As one of our legislators once said, "Access to justice is a nonpartisan issue." Maintain this funding for Washington's trial courts. They are the people's courts.

Deborah Fleck is a King County Superior Court judge.

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